

PathLights

*"Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path"
Psalm 119:104*

April 17, 2016

Interpreting Figurative Language

by Frank Himmel

Bible writers and speakers at times use figures of speech. These include metaphors and similes (simple comparisons), parables (illustrations), hyperbole (purposeful exaggeration), metonymy (one thing put in place of another), personification (things or abstractions represented as persons) – the same devices employed by speakers and writers in all fields.

These techniques are intended to enhance communication. They make it more vivid, more picturesque, more memorable. Their purpose is to clarify, not confuse. Correctly interpreting them is usually not difficult. It requires nothing more than the common sense approach we use as we confront such language on a daily basis. The following “rules” are simply an effort to delineate what we often do without thinking about it.

1. Let the author or speaker give the interpretation.

If anyone knows what one means by a figure, it is the one who uses it. His explanation is final. Therefore, when Jesus interprets one of His parables (e.g., Matthew 13:18-23), that is what it means; no more,

no less. When the Holy Spirit through an apostle explains what He meant by something He said earlier through a prophet (e.g., 1 Peter 2:6; Isaiah 28:16), that is decisive. We have no basis to try to make the language refer to anything else.

2. Consider the natural properties of a figure.

A “whale of a difference” is a lot of difference! One who “can’t spell *cat*” is no intellectual. And you don’t nickname a man “flash” who is “slower than molasses.”



Jesus’ “I am” statements illustrate this simple approach. “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35), that which must be consumed for sustenance. “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12), He who illumines the way so we will not stumble. “I am the door” (John 10:7), the entrance to fellowship with God. “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11), who lays down His life for the sheep.

One word of caution here: a figure may not always mean the same thing in every context. For example, water might suggest sustenance (Deuteronomy 23:4), cleansing (Ephesians 5:26), or adversity (Psalm 69:1-2).

3. Consider the historical significance of a figure.

To say someone “met his Waterloo” doesn’t mean much to those who are ignorant of history. Likewise, those not conversant with Old Testament history will surely miss the point when the Lord said there were some ▶

at Pergamum who held to “the teaching of Balaam” (Revelation 2:14); when He complained that the church at Thyatira tolerated “Jezebel” (Revelation 2:20); or later when He spoke of the battle of “Har-Magadon [Armageddon]” (Revelation 16:16). Megiddo was a prominent battle site in Israel’s history. It simply indicates a decisive battle, just as Gettysburg would in our country’s history.

4. Interpret consistently with literal accounts. It seems obvious that we should always reason from the simple to the more complex, from the known to the unknown, from the literal to the figurative. When we do, we will not interpret a figure of speech, in which there might be some latitude, in a way that contradicts a literal, straight-forward statement.

Jesus’ remark, “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold” (John 10:16), has been erroneously used to advocate denominationalism. Yet other passages plainly denounce division (1 Corinthians 1:10; Galatians 5:19-21). Besides, denominationalism did not exist until centuries after Jesus’ day. The “other sheep” are Gentiles.

5. Do not demand too many points of analogy. Almost always, when we use some figure of speech we mean just one thing by it. Rarely is it an attempt to communicate some vast network of ideas. The Bible is no different. Occasionally, a figure is extensive (e.g., Galatians 4:21-31), but that is the exception rather than the rule. We err by overanalyzing figures, trying to make them more than they are. Discern the point and move on.

Come and See

by Frank Himmel

When Jesus called Philip to follow Him, Philip found Nathanael and told him he had found the Messiah, Jesus the Nazarene. Nathanael was skeptical: “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Philip simply answered, “Come and see” (John 1:43-46).

Philip’s answer could not have been better. “Come and see,” come check it out, is great advice when it comes to religious questions. Don’t react prejudicially as Nathanael initially did. Don’t think you know the answers before looking at the evidence. Come and see. Search the Scriptures. Search them with an open mind.

Nathanael went, and soon he saw; he, too, became a disciple of Jesus. Are you open to the truth?



“To know wisdom and instruction, to discern the sayings of understanding, to receive instruction in wise behavior, righteousness, justice and equity; . . . a wise man will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel, to understand a proverb and a figure, the words of the wise and their riddles” (Proverbs 1:2-6).

Service Leaders for the Week

	Sunday Morning	Sunday Evening	Wednesday Evening
GREETER	Paul Richmond	Mark Clifton	Carlos Garcia
SONG LEADER	Clifton Lefort	Greg Winget	Chad Brock
OPENING PRAYER	Mark Clifton	Kerry Gray	
LORD’S SUPPER			
BREAD	Steven Turner	Steven Turner	
CUP	Adam Gibson	Adam Gibson	
CONTRIBUTION PRAYER	Josh Baucom		
SERMON/INVITATION	Frank Himmel	Frank Himmel	Howard Moore
CLOSING PRAYER	Paul Richmond	William Lefort	Lee Davenport